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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000700

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: WEEKEND OF CONFLICT IN CARACAS; NO CNE DECISION YET

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(d).

Summary

1. (C) Opposition groups staged two days of protests in the wake of the February 27 march that left one dead and dozens injured. The GOV staged its own march of hundreds of thousands on February 28 to protest U.S. intervention in Venezuelan affairs. Speaking to the crowd, President Chavez delivered an unusually ferocious attack against the USG, in which he repeatedly attacked President Bush, claiming he had evidence of U.S. invasion plans. The President promised to meet any blockade or invasion by cutting off oil to the U.S.; any actions against Venezuelan companies in the U.S. would be reciprocated against U.S. companies in Venezuela. The National Electoral Council (CNE) did not/not report the preliminary results of the presidential recall signature drive on February 29 as planned and plans to meet on March 1 to come to an agreement. The CNE approved instructions for the five-day challenge period for the referendum petition signatures and asked for comments from the parties. End summary.

Three Days of Conflict

2. (U) In the wake of the GOV's quelling of the opposition's march on February 27, small opposition groups staged protests throughout Venezuela on February 28 and 29. Protesters blocked roads, burning tires and trash day and night, throughout the eastern part of Caracas. GOV security forces made little effort to clear protests and open roads. Similar incidents were reported in the states of Zulia, Carabobo, Lara, Anzoategui, and Tachira. Some protesters claimed to be acting under Article 350 of the constitution, which obligates citizens to reject a government that strays from democratic rule or violates human rights. Graffiti around Caracas says: "RR or 350" (Recall Referendum or Article 350 of the Constitution).

3. (U) In Caracas, the main conflict February 29 occurred at Plaza Francia in the pro-opposition area of Altamira, where dozens of National Guard clashed with more than a hundred protesters. Eight protesters were wounded by gunshots and more than 100 suffered from tear gas, according to Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez.

4. (U) An opposition group of about 120 people demonstrated support for the USG at the Embassy on February 29. The demonstration was peaceful and without incident.

GOV Rallies March Against Imperialism

5. (C) The GOV organized a mass march on February 29 with participants from all over the country. The theme was rejection of U.S. intervention in Venezuela and of electoral fraud by the opposition. Foreign press reports said more than 100,000 people attended the march, which ended on the Francisco Fajardo highway. Private media reports showed more than a hundred buses used to transport many march participants from outside Caracas. Poloff observed about 300 pro-government marchers heading toward the march's beginning point under escort by five armed men in plain clothes on motorcycle. The marchers appeared to be from the states of Cojedes and Anzoategui and carried anti-U.S. signs. DCM observed marchers arriving from eastern Caracas. The class and racial differences between these marchers and the anti-GOV marchers were striking. Most marchers were organized (e.g., by participation in Plan Ribas, Plan Robinson, Diosdado Cabello supporters) and identified by T-shirts. The demonstrations were enthusiastic.

Chavez Alleges U.S. Invasion Plans

16. (U) During his two-and-a-half-hour speech to march participants, obligatorily broadcast on all Venezuelan television and radio stations, President Chavez railed against the United States for alleged imperialism and intervention throughout the world. He claimed to have radio intercepts from February 28 proving that U.S. warships were preparing to invade Venezuela. Chavez threatened to cut off oil shipments to the U.S. if the USG moved to blockade or invade Venezuela. Chavez also vowed to reciprocate any actions against Venezuelan assets in the United States with actions against U.S. investments in Venezuela. Chavez offered a bet to President Bush that he, Chavez, would remain in office longer. He also made a racially-charged reference to Secretary Powell's decision not to run for president in 1996 for fear of being assassinated. He insulted the President, twice calling him a "pendejo" (literally a pubic hair, colloquially a derogatory term for idiot).

CNE Puts Off Decision One More Day

17. (U) National Electoral Council (CNE) director Jorge Rodriguez (pro-GOV) announced late on February 29 that the CNE board would release preliminary results of the verification of signatures collected in support of a recall referendum against President Chavez 24 hours later on March

18. The CNE worked over the weekend without the two opposition directors, Ezequiel Zamora and Sobella Mejias. In their absence, the CNE board approved instructions for the five-day challenge process to affirm or contest signatures tossed out during the verification process. Rodriguez said the parties to the signature drive could "evaluate the appropriateness" of the instructions before the preliminary results are released. Zamora said publicly that the instructions as approved would make the referendum not feasible.

Comment

18. (C) Having reached the boiling point, the political situation is only going to be made more tense by the CNE's decision. It is doubtful the CNE is going to reach a mutually favorable decision on the five-day challenge process and the number of signatures subject to it. Though he was clearly playing it up for the occasion, Chavez's speech was the most severe anti-American rhetoric in the past two years. He has marked the United States as the intellectual masters of the opposition, equating an electoral solution with a coup and, now, with an invasion. While Chavez's charges against us are laughable, the capacity for his supporters to listen to him crying wolf, and believe him, seems infinite.

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